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President Obama's Visit to Israel: More than meets the eye

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(910 words)

In life, timing is everything. And President Obama's visit to our tough neighborhood comes at a crucial time; Israel and the Middle East are at a decisive juncture. Tough decisions -- which require openness and a depth of trust -- are around the corner.

Today, I am finishing six years as Israel's defense minister. I have served my country for over half a century, from a private in the IDF, all the way to Prime Minister. I have worked with five US presidents and witnessed the US-Israel relationship blossom. In fact, the relationship is very much like a loblolly pine tree, one of the most common trees in the US. It grows at an immense pace, it has solid roots, and even if it suffers minor damage during particularly harsh winters – it remains robust and evergreen. Just as the pine's needles are in bundles of three, so can we analyze the three key dimensions of the US-Israel relationship; (i) political, (ii) security (iii) grassroots.

The political dimension receives the most attention. There are inevitable disagreements between governments; just as there are disagreements between the best of friends. You choose your friends because you have a critical mass of interests. The relationship between our nations is welded together; cemented by a plethora of

common interests. So even when a few needles fall in the wind, the core strength of the tree remains unaffected.

In the security field, Israel and the US have never been closer. Together, American and Israeli scientists and engineers are developing a multi-layer missile defense system. The joint projects, 'David's Sling' and the 'Arrow 3', complement the operational 'Arrow 2' system forming a protective barrier against incoming ballistic missiles. These systems create thousands of jobs all across America and Israel.

'Iron Dome', the ground breaking Israeli designed system which intercepts short-range rockets, has received vital financial support from President Obama's administration. Last November, this system intercepted over 80% of Hamas' 500 rockets and missiles that were launched out of Gaza towards Israeli homes and schools. However, missile defense is merely the tip of the 'security iceberg'. Shared intelligence and the US army's application of Israeli technology ensure that the security relationship is a genuinely two-way street.

The third element anchoring this relationship is below the surface. The American people, from 1948 until today look at Israel; and see themselves. Israel; an immigrant community, a young democracy, was a vision to be realized – it is still being realized. As the only stable, open, liberal state in the Middle East, Israel is the natural ally for the US in a hostile and unpredictable neighborhood.

And what of the timing of President Obama's trip? An unprecedented geopolitical earthquake has shattered the regional order. There are two clear lessons and one insight which I have extracted from these events. (i) Be modest with predictions. Take Egypt, for example, who predicted the revolution? (ii) Do not to rely on 'the world' to act. Look at Syria. Assad's jet fighters, tanks and artillery are slaughtering his own citizens. Over 70,000 Syrians killed. Yet there is still no sense of direction and no political will to act.

And the insight: Many believe that the root cause for all the problems in the Middle East is the inability to solve the conflict with the Palestinians. Clearly this is not true. Recent developments in the Middle East have been far beyond our control, and completely independent of our deeds. Even if a peace agreement with the Palestinians had been signed and sealed a long time ago: The Muslim Brotherhood would still have come to power in Egypt; Syria would still be mired in a bloody civil war; and Iran would still be pursuing nuclear capabilities and a hegemonic role in the Gulf.

And it is Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities which is the paramount challenge facing Israel, the region and the world today. A nuclear hegemonic Iran spells the end of any conceivable non-proliferation regime. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and later Egypt will follow suit. In the future, even terrorist groups may try.

A nuclear Iran is thus the most imminent and acute danger to the stability of the entire region, and all options must remain on the table to prevent this. Currently, radical Islamist terror is spreading rapidly, while the accumulation of missiles and rockets begin to necessitate regional missile defense.

Facing this particular assortment of threats, we should firstly construct a ‘Regional Security Framework’. If led by the United States, this framework could provide a host of synergies for all its regional participants.

Secondly, we need a daring peace initiative vis-à-vis the Palestinians. A two-state solution is the only viable solution. It is a compelling imperative for us, in order to secure our future as a Jewish and democratic state. Ideally, the two sides will sign a negotiated final status agreement. But should these negotiations fail, interim agreements, and even unilateral steps, should be considered in order to place a wedge on this dangerous slippery slope towards a binational state.

The strategic triangle of the 'Regional Security Framework'; a reinvigorated peace process with the Palestinians; and tackling Iran; buttressed by a solid Israel-US relationship, is the most effective approach to deal with the dynamic challenges on our horizon.

Currently the tree stands strong. But soon, it must bear the decisive fruits that are necessary to secure future generations. Timing is everything.